

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

Communicative Space and the Maritime Agora

Chui-Ling Tam

University of Calgary, cltam@ucalgary.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sciencecommunication>



Part of the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Tam, Chui-Ling (2016). Communicative Space and the Maritime Agora. Jean Goodwin (Ed.), *Confronting the Challenges of Public Participation in Environmental, Planning, and Health Decision-Making*. <https://doi.org/10.31274/sciencecommunication-180809-18>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Symposia at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iowa State University Summer Symposium on Science Communication by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Communicative Space and the Maritime Agora

CHUI-LING TAM

*Department of Geography
University of Calgary
2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4
Canada
cltam@ucalgary.ca*

ABSTRACT: Deliberative participation is a popular strategy in contested spaces such as fisheries and marine protected areas. However, in Indonesia, maritime dwellers share stories in spaces unbounded by the moment that new spatial imaginaries or participatory decision-making processes emerge. Such communicative spaces form a maritime agora of backrooms and thoroughfares where knowledge and lived experience are discussed and performed. This reveals three insights. First, communication chaos and disorder are intrinsic to informal participation. Second, thoroughfares should be viewed not as temporary passing spaces but as habitual time-spaces of engagement. And third, the boundaries between public and private communicative space are elastic.

KEYWORDS: communicative space, decision-making, fisheries, Indonesia, marine protected areas, participation

1. INTRODUCTION

Marine spaces are complex environments where local livelihoods intersect with national economic development and global environmental movements. Such spaces are often bound into discreet manageable units accompanied – especially in the past two decades – by deliberative public participation processes such as public consultations and information sessions. However, marine and coastal inhabitants share stories in spaces not necessarily bounded by the moment that new spatial imaginaries or participatory decision-making processes emerge. In Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, marine dwellers engage in far-ranging conversations of varying duration in public walkways and private abodes uncontained by the deliberative machinery of invited participation.

The intent in this short essay is to briefly explore such communicative spaces as a collective maritime agora of backrooms and thoroughfares where knowledge and experience are discussed and performed, thus serving as the broader context for deliberative participation in marine resource management. The question is whether participation can be rendered more effective by recognizing the existence of such spaces, and accounting for how, what and which publics communicate in such spaces.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND STUDY CONTEXT

A chief aim of public participation is the creation of spaces for inclusive communication across different interest groups to promote appropriate, equitable and effective policy decisions. In Indonesian maritime communities, participation in resource management is often designed as publicly accessible events scheduled to take place at designated sites. These formal meetings

Tam, Chui-Ling. (2016). Communicative Space and the Maritime Agora. In Jean Goodwin (Ed.), *Confronting the Challenges of Public Participation: Issues in Environmental, Planning and Health Decision-Making* (pp. 235-237). Charleston, SC: CreateSpace. Copyright © 2016 the author(s).

and workshops are often conducted as deliberately scheduled events where various officials and experts, seated at a dais or long table at the front of the meeting space, face an audience seated in rows of chairs toward the back. Among the dispersed fishing villages of the Indonesian province of Southeast Sulawesi, the difficulties of convening local people in a central place and time are significant. Effective widespread communication is closely tied to the logistical challenges of traversing space to participate in such forums.

In this paper, the author assays a geographic sensibility to examine the ritual performance of deliberative participation in two maritime communities of Southeast Sulawesi. The first is a village in the Tiworo Straits, where an ostensibly “community-based” sustainable mangrove stream fish pond project was introduced in 2000, designed by a provincial non-government organization, funded by a provincial government development agency, and physically built by the collective labour of fishing villagers. The project was never completed and villagers became indifferent to its existence. The second community is in Wakatobi National Park, a globally celebrated marine protected area (MPA) ostensibly based on ecosystem principles and community consultation. Wakatobi involves a multiple-use zoning system; it was established in 1996, but community dissatisfaction with the use zones led to a rezoning of the park in 2007, and villagers remain variously angry, confused and pleased with the resource management regime. Both initiatives are distinguished by communication failures such as a flawed consultation process and pre-determined management solutions which affected communities could only influence to a limited extent, and elite interests (see Tam 2006, 2015). We can view these initiatives as failures of participation and implementation. However, the task here is to examine the pre-existing communication context into which participation and management interventions are inserted.

Findings at both sites reveal that maritime villagers in these parts revel in shared storytelling in non-deliberative communication spaces such as walkways, backrooms and front porches, where conversations – and even formal research interviews – are conducted in a multi-tasking space suited to a flexible communication focus. In such spaces, personal behaviour is interwoven with the building of trust. Schedules are fluid, following the daily and seasonal rhythms of marine harvest. Communication time-space reflects the logic of the four-part Indonesian day (morning, afternoon, late afternoon and night), the fisher’s day which favours night-time and early morning fishing, and maritime housing structures in which private outside spaces such as front porches and bathing areas are often open to public view. Public spaces such as mosques and playgrounds promote conversation. People gather where space and time are available, fitted around their other commitments.

3. TOWARD A MARITIME AGORA

There are similarities in the communication geographies of Tiworo and Wakatobi. Three aspects are key here: the communication significance of space design and spatially specific behaviour, the communication habits of maritime communities, and the spatial constraints on and opportunities for communication in and with maritime communities. The agora serves as a useful metaphor here. The agora, a central place in Ancient Greece, signifies a liberal democratic public sphere where goods and ideas are exchanged openly among all citizens. Darker interpretations of the agora describe a constrained space where the badge of citizenship is conferred on select elites (Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Touaf & Boutkhil, 2008), raising questions about which publics control the design and validity of communication space.

The maritime agora reveals three insights. First, communication chaos and disorder are intrinsic to informal participation outside the deliberative context of staged meetings, workshops and consultations – this is what participation looks like *on the ground* in villages of Tiworo and Wakatobi. Second, thoroughfares – those spaces in between an embarkation point and destination – should be viewed not as temporary passing spaces but as community spaces of engagement. And third, the boundaries between public and private communicative space are elastic, and this spatial hybridity is a fertile arena for engagement. Ultimately, the author suggests that the maritime agora be framed as a communicative space that can be identified, analysed, and mobilized for participation in resource management solutions.

REFERENCES

- Davenport, S., & Leitch, S. (2005). Agoras, ancient and modern, and a framework for science–society debate. *Science and Public Policy*, 32(2), 137–153. <http://doi.org/10.3152/147154305781779605>
- Tam, C.-L. (2006). Harmony hurts: participation and silent conflict at an Indonesian fish pond. *Environmental Management*, 38(1), 1–15. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s00267-004-8851-4>
- Tam, C.-L. (2015). Timing exclusion and communicating time: a spatial analysis of participation failure in an Indonesian MPA. *Marine Policy*, 54, 122–129. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2015.01.001>
- Touaf, L., & Boutkhil, S. (Eds.). (2008). *The World as a Global Agora: Critical Perspectives on Public Space*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

